WASHINGTON DAILY NEWS
23 JUN 1971

P- Furgurson, Ernest B.
P- McNamara, Robert
Soc.4.01.1 New York Times
P- Trewhitt, Henry L.
Soc.4.01.2 McNamara; His Ordeal in the Pentagon

# Ernest B. Furgurson / We're all in it

AT the vortex of the swirling controversy over publication of secret Pentagon records on Vietnam is the man who ordered assembly of the records in the first place. But, like very few others involved, he is not being heard in reaction.

Since Robert McNamara departed the Pentagon in 1968 he has become to Washington political and governmental circles what Howard Hughes is in the world of Hollywood and high finance — a virtual recluse.

Immediately on leaving office, he fled to Aspen, Colo., to ski for a month. As head of the World Bank, he has spoken with occasional eloquence about the dangers of world overpopulation and the duty of the industrial nations to aid the poorer ones. But what he says usually winds up somewhere back in the business pages, instead of out on page one. And he clearly wants it that way. He is a man trying to bury his past.

The picture of him that flickers back into the public's mind first remains that of the human computer with slicked-down hair, the self-assured proponent of military flexibility who muscled into practice theories that earlier secretaries had never been able to move beyond the position-paper stage.

Most of us forget the tears he shed in public when he watched the carrier John F. Kennedy move down the waves, and when he heard Lyndon Johnson's words of praise at departure ceremonies in his own honor. But it is clear now that some of those tears followed the hardheaded earlier performances almost as effect follows cause, and in sequence his current reticence seems just as understandable.

o o o

THE first document run by the New York Times in its massive disclosure of the Pentagon archives is a McNamara report to Mr. Johnson on his return from Saigon in December, 1963. In it the secretary notes that "plans for covert action into North Vietnam were prepared as we had requested and were an excellent job." In March, 1964, it was Mr. McNamara who laid down the idea of "retaliatory actions" and "graduated overt military pressure" against North Vietnam. The implication is that these were germinal contributions to the strategy of escalation, and they were.

But his readiness to move into Vietnam far pre-dated the records last week. The best account of his personal role in the buildup and letdown is now at hand in Henry L. Trewhitt's forthcoming book, "McNamara: His Ordeal in the Pentagon" (Harper & Row), which by convenient accidental timing is to be released as the furor over the escalation record is at its height.

o o o

LARGELY overlooked in the rush by media and politicians to point the finger of blame for what happened in the past decade, there hovers the fact that John Kennedy and Robert McNamara both linked what was happening in Vietnam more closely than hindsight allows to Nikita Khrushchev's 1961 pledge of backing for "wars of national liberation" everywhere. They saw Vietnam thus as a direct challenge, a test of American response to that threat from Moscow.

It also appeared to Mr. McNamara to be a "direct test for the doctrine of flexible response at the lower end of the spectrum," in Mr. Trewhitt's words. This was the doctrine he had forced thru against the advocates of reliance on the big bomb alone, and because he was its apostle he had to take the test more personally than others. He was not alone in assuming back then that the response would be exercised merely "at the lower end of the spectrum."

So, as early as 1961-1962, "For better or worse — and in the end to his own anguish — he became the dominant public figure on Vietnamese policy beneath the two Presidents he served." Mr. Trewhitt points out that Dean Rusk, who later became the villain to many critics of the war, in fact bowed in this field to Mr. McNamara because he considered Vietnam more a military than a diplomatic problem.

But the thrust of this column and of Mr. Trewhitt's meticulous book is not to make a villain of Mr. McNamara. It is to make clear, for example by reminding of Mr. McNamara's eventual remorse, that the Vietnam venture was undertaken by men of genuine conviction — accompanied by genuine innocence at the outset of how sticky the morass could become.

The fact that they were proved wrong by events they could not foresee does not make them evil men. To try to cast them in that light on the basis of current disclosures is to do very much what the Red hunters in Washington did in the early '50s in their attempts to blame the fall of China on individual Americans. To do that, then or now, is to ignore the reality that we all got into this together.